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Art

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Artist Statement

Eben Goff

In exploration of Butte, Montana, mining metropolis of bygone days, I have encountered a landscape of upheaval and burial. As a person from elsewhere, understanding this unique space is like learning a new language. When decoded, it renders the topography of heaps and excavations into a map of history.

Areas strewn with the mechanical remnants, chemical by-products, and earthen surplus from over one hundred years of mining are read as disintegrating stories. In the heyday of this city, the miners, like subterranean mountain climbers, named each copper, zinc, and silver vein that ran through the granite strata. Today, Superfund reclamation projects have begun to sanitize the defunct industrial sites. Dozens of mine shafts have been capped with anonymous concrete slabs. Mining has lost its central economic position in the community.

People no longer feel the need to remember locations or names of the increasingly invisible mine yards. The knowledge is passing out of practical purpose, and thus, out of intimacy or detail into the realm of local lore. Verbal maps of the terrain become vague. This memory loss works opposite the usual direction—the younger members of the community are less aware of the roles or names of empty lots and eroding tailings piles, while some of the older folks in the community continue to orient by these 'void spaces,' often referring to locations relative to where something used to be.

When I return again and again to unnamed places within the mine, names begin to suggest themselves. Returning and naming befriends that place; it creates intimate orientation and enables me to internalize their qualities. Accumulated experiences become a personal archive and the source for my large oil paintings. Multiple sites are threaded together to create more complete portraits of place.

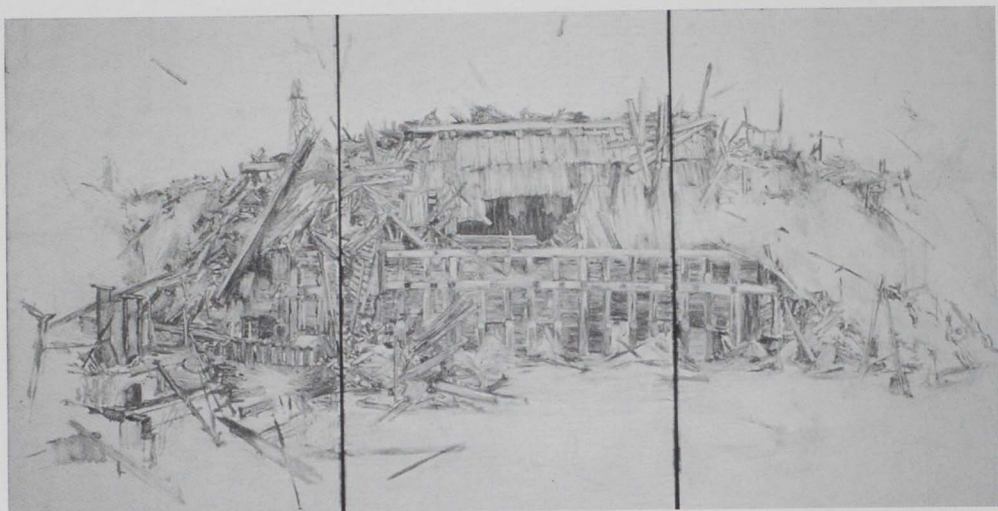
My mental archive is enriched by photographs and drawings made on site (lately, small, engraved beeswax panels). As a painter, I acknowledge that many of the basic materials of my craft, (i.e., cadmium red, cobalt blue, nickel yellow, etc.) are the little offspring of industrial chemical facilities and mining operations. Incorporated into this array, I am making my own paints using pigments collected from the mine sites.

Furthermore, the character of this land, a place where the forces of erosion now rule, has a certain synergy with the fluid tendencies of paint applied by brush. I deeply enjoy these holistic, reciprocal relationships between the nature of paint and what I use it to depict.

All of this composes a type of mapping where scale is fluctuating and images are not purely documentary. Rather than actual diagrams or instructions for navigating, these amalgams are the result of my own mapping process. The yield of my own navigations through a landscape extensively molded to the functions of rail beds, pipelines, and ore crushers, it is an uncontained factory. The ordering implicit in the act of mapping is equally present in our industrial incursions: A grid laid over a continent, or a mountainside detonated and carved into a series of thirty by fifty foot ledges.

The essence of what I see in Butte is nature reclaiming these imposed geometries. Through our abandon, the grace of decay is once again carrying everything towards the lowest possible point. I am here as witness to this movement and as an unusual agent in this process of remediation.

















Don A. Anderson, the author's father